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ABSTRACT

A study contrasted two first grade writing programs to ascertain changes in the students' regard for writing in a manner that could be measured and compared. One writing program encouraged students to write expressively and find their way into print, while the other program used the more traditional or skill-sequenced approach through preparatory steps. It was hypothesized that students using the expressive writing strategy would show measurable improvement in three aspects: (1) the students' understanding of the function of writing, (2) their attitude toward writing, and (3) their regard for themselves as writers. The pretest and posttest instrument consisted of 24 questions that covered writing function, attitude, self-concept, and technical vocabulary. The writing programs were monitored by collecting samples of work from six randomly chosen students from each of six classrooms. Results showed the expressive writing students improved in their grasp of technical writing terms, and yet the two groups did not appear to differ significantly in their regard for themselves as writers. In addition, the expressive writing classes' positive responses to writing declined over the course of the year while the skill-sequenced class did not grow appreciably more positive toward writing. (HOD)

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THE IMPACT OF LITERACY: LEARNING TO WRITE

This has proved a promising decade for writing instruction. From the work of Donald Graves (1983; 1984) on the east coast to the Bay Area Writing Project (Myers and Gray, 1983) on the west, strong programs have emerged backed by outspoken advocates. Simply put, these programs would have students from the very beginning write as writers. Recent research into the process and acquisition of writing suggests that little else may be needed (Smith, 1982; Harste, Woodward and Burke, 1984). Rather than waiting until the skills are in place to write, students in the first grade are encouraged to find their way into print and publishing without going through the workbook approach to prove their readiness. Thus far the reports on this new approach have been principally testimonial and ethnographic, with enthusiastic responses in both cases. What has been repeatedly found is that the

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students are writing marvelous things and they are proud of what they write. The claims are supported by impressive instances of the students' work. The celebration of this work is underwritten by a sense of both the improved performance of the children and by their improved attitude toward writing. The question which this study takes up on a very modest scale is whether we can ascertain more precisely what differences in attitude and understanding of writing this writerly introduction into literacy makes when compared to the experience students receive in what might be contrasted as a skill-sequenced approach.

Judging by the implicit claims of what I will term the expressive-writing strategy, there ought to be a measurable improvement in three aspects: a) the students' understanding of the function of writing, b) in their attitude toward writing, and c) in their regard for themselves as writers. On the other hand, we might still expect that the traditional or a skill-sequenced approach to writing through preparatory steps will produce a stronger sense of what a word and a sentence are. Against these expectations, I found a degree of both confirmation and refutation in the differences which emerged between an expressive-writing and a skill-sequenced introduction to writing. In brief, the expressive-writing students improved in their grasp of technical writing terms, and yet the two groups did not appear to differ significantly in their regard for themselves as writers. As well, there were a few unexpected results in the nature of the attitude engendered toward writing which point to some of the subtle intricacies in the social psychology of learning to write.

Method

This study used a pre-test post-test design to ascertain changes in the student's regard for writing in a manner which could be measured and compared under two different programs. The test instrument consisted of twenty-four questions which were administered to the grade one students in a ten-minute interview which was conducted in October and then again in May of the same school year (see Appendix). The questions covered the four areas described above: writing function, attitude, self-concept, and technical vocabulary. The sample for this study consisted of six grade one classrooms ($\underline{N}$ = 109) which the language arts coordinator for the district advised were evenly divided between three expressive-writing classrooms and three skill-sequenced classrooms, as well being roughly matched in the socio-economic level of the neighborhoods. The actual writing programs used in the classrooms were monitored by collecting samples of the work of six randomly-chosen students from each class over the course of eight two-week periods during the school year. These samples demonstrated that though there was a clear distinction in writing instruction between the two programs, the classrooms proved to be other than either ideal or pure instances of either approach. That is, a few work-book pages did turn up in samples collected from the expressive-writing classrooms and the odd narrative was written in the skill-sequenced classroom. Which is to say that I had found typical classrooms in the hands of typical teachers. They are representative of what we might expect in the filtration and adaptation of ideas throughout the school system. The actual measure of the differences in the writing which two programs produced is shown in Table 1.

Place Table 1 about here

The test instrument which I used with the students contains a number of items borrowed and new. In the areas of vocabulary and writing function, I turned to the methods of Downing and Oliver (1973-4) for the identification of "words," to Calkins (1980) for punctuation, and to Mayfield (1983) for writing function. The groundwork in writing attitudes and in self-concept as a writer had not been so thoroughly laid. I have attempted to measure the students changed regard for themselves over the course of grade one by using both direct questions - "Is writing fun?"; "Are you a writer?" - and more subtle means. After examining the meager resources for assessing self-concept in young school children, I decided to use a variation on the picture self-identification technique. I commissioned seven cartoons in male and female versions which showed a fairly uniform set of characters in a number of activities and situations from the classroom to the doctor's office. The students were asked to select one figure in each picture whom they would be "if they had to be one of the people in the picture." The character chosen was scored as either active or passive - addressing the question of whether an active, developed sense of self was to be encouraged by fostering the student's personal voice on the page.

The pictures were initially tested with a class of students and the reasons for their choices, were used to modify the cartoons, removing extraneous and distracting elements. With the pictures adjusted, the entire instrument was piloted with a class of twenty students after which further refinements were made to the ordering and wording of the questions. The interviews with the students were held in the school library and began with the cartoons as these were found in the pilot to put the children at their ease. To analyse the impact of the two programs, t-tests were run on the differences between the pre-test and post-test scores to establish the

significance of the change over the year in their understanding and regard for this aspect of literacy.

Results

Of the four composite measures in which we might have expected a sizeable improvement in the attitude and understanding of the expressive-writing classes compared to the skill-sequenced classes, only in the technical vocabulary of literacy did the expressive-writing classes make significantly greater gains than the skill-sequenced classrooms (table 2).

Place Table 2 about here

To check the relationship among the four composite measures I calculated the Pearson product moment correlation coefficients matrix between all of the pairs and found no higher correlation than .26 which was obtained between writing self-concept and function. Because gender has proven to be an important influence in children's response to schooling, I also ran the results for significant differences in the gains made by gender and found none in the four composites. Finally, I calculated an analysis of variance to determine the interaction effect between program and gender; there was no significant interaction on the composite measures.

The students' grasp of the function of writing (of who writes, what an author does, what can be done with writing, and what do you make stories about) showed a gain in both classes which did not differ significantly in the composite scores. But on one of the individual items - "what can be done with writing?" - the expressive-writing class was able to name a significantly larger number of fuctions over the course of the year ($p < .05$), with the

skill-sequenced class coming up with fewer functions in the final interview than they had offered eight months earlier.

In the attitude measures, the expressive-writing classes' positive responses to writing declined over the course of the year while the skill-sequenced class did not grow appreciably more positive toward writing. This decline in the regard for writing among the students working in the expressive-writing program raises the most interesting challenge. The measure is admittedly crude; attitude measures are always a source of caution and qualification. But in examining the different aspects on which I did query the students, it does seem that doing more personal and extended writing with the students will not guarantee the expression of a higher regard for the virtues of writing. As the students did more writing and had more demanded of them in writing, they knew enough of its intricacies to name what I termed in the interview "the bad things about writing". The bad things ranged, in the students' words, from the problem of "messy writing" and "scribbling" to "if you don't know what you are supposed to do." The "good" things about writing, on the other hand, included that fact that you "make pictures and write stories," "learn about stuff," and "exercise arms." That these writers could also suffer a decline in their opinion about whether writing is a good way to say something would also seem to indicate a certain level of frustration which might have been avoided in the lock-step, programmed skills approach to reading readiness.

In the assessment of self-concept, both groups made similar gains in their declarations of themselves as writers and as readers. Equally so with the set of cartoons for self-identification, both groups made a similiar move to more active figures. The clearest gains in one program over another, however, remained in the technical vocabulary of writing rather than in the

students' expression of their affective or functional regard for writing. With the elements of a writing vocabulary which I measured, from the identification of words and sentences to naming the components of a story, the expressive-writing class did significantly better. Still, this was somewhat other than what might have been expected. In the skill-sequenced classes, the students' work showed a focus on the word, for instance, as they copied the words from the board or the top of their sheet, as well as on its parts as they identified the initial sounds through picture-letter matchups. Yet the expressive-writing students achieved a greater gain in their oral identification of a word as a unit, with only a slightly weaker show in identifying words in the written format. Understandably with the opportunity to write narratives, this group also showed a significantly greater gain in their ability to identify the major punctuation marks.

Discussion

This initial study suggests that having students do more extensive and "meaningful" writing will not ensure a noteably greater expression of a confidence in themselves as writers nor a greater enthusiasm about the possibilities of writing, though they may acquire a greater sense of its usefulness in the world at large. The students, I would suggest, in both classes are not in a position to evaluate their instruction, as we might, in comparison to how adults write, especially in relation to how the professional writes. If the skill-sequenced students did not find their introduction to writing stifling, it may be because they have no romantic notions of writers working away in New York studio-lofts or Rocky Mountain cabins with which to contrast to their own sorry assignments. The skill sheet provides an immediate sense of both writing and of a clear-cut competence, however distant it is from having a story accepted by The New Yorker.

On the other hand, the students who had the opportunity and responsibility to sustain their work for a page or more could be expected to know in more detail the difficulties or "bad things about writing." Professional writers, afterall, are quick enough to tell you about the terror of the blank page which they face time and again: "all of the writing in these years (1978-82) was very painful to me" (Graves, 1984, p. 5). We are the ones who wax enthusiastic about these child-writers, and though we might expect them to catch a good part of our enthusiasm for writerly writing, they seem to catch no more of it than is provided in classes where they are child-students carefully mastering and climbing the steps to literacy.

These findings also suggest, again in a qualified manner, that students who write more independently at least seem to learn more about the units of writing - the word and sentence - which they have worked in so diligently; they seem to know more, too, about the function of writing, as they have done more with it. In comparison to such gains, the larger questions which expressive writing begs - are the students changed by writing; are they creating or finding themselves on the page? - must continue to be guided by acts of faith. My rough efforts to tap changes in self-concept through the use of the cartoons suggested that both groups had made a slight shift in their identifications to more assertive characters, as if getting out into the public forum of the school full-time might in itself be an uplifting experience. Yet whether writing out of oneself is a means of creating a self-concept of greater agency remains to be established.

It will take a number of different designs and repeated measures to ascertain with any degree of certainty the impact on students of these different introductions into literacy. The question is not simply academic. Teachers confronted by two contesting paradigms deserve to have as many of

their questions answered as possible. Research must continue to be done on the role of self-expression in the development of the child, as well as into whether broadening the function writing can have lasting effects on participation in the literacy of the community. Finally, there remains the extent to which a skills approach can still lay a foundation of self-confidence and competence in literacy. Which is to say, that both approaches, the skill-sequenced and the expressive-writing, continue to deserve careful scrutiny and more sophisticated techniques in assessing what students are learning about literacy and about themselves as they are taken down these different roads to literacy.

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Table 1

Average Number of Pages per Student in a Week

Group	n	Type of Writing (in pages) Skill[a]	Expressive[b]
Skill-Sequenced Program	57	3.18	.59
Expressive-Writing Program	52	.73	2.69

[a]Skill-based writing included work on phonetics, letter formation, and sentence completion.

[b]Expressive writing demonstrated student control of units of at least a sentence in length.

Table 2

t-Tests of Pre-Test to Post-Test Gains on Four Composite Measures

	Mean Scores				t-Tests on Gains	
	Skill-Sequence		Expressive-Writing		(df = 107)	
ITEM	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	t	p
Writing Function	9.12	9.23	7.06	8.35	-1.10	.272
Writing Attitude	2.23	2.33	2.94	2.42	1.19	.236
Self-Concept	4.51	5.72	4.27	4.96	1.09	.280
Technical Vocabulary	12.32	14.67	10.06	15.12	-3.71	.001

Appendix

Interview Schedule

Self-Concept

1. Who would you like to be in this picture? [seven pictures]
2. Are you a writer or a printer?
3. Are you a reader?
4. Who is interested in what you write (in your stories)?
5. Would you like to make books for others to read?

Writing Function

6. What are all the things you like to make stories about?
7. What can be done with writing?
8. Who do you know who writes?
9. Who do you write for (make stories for)?
10. What does an author or writer do?

Writing Attitude

11. What are all the good things about writing?
12. What are all the bad things about writing?
13. Is writing fun?
14. Do you make something with writing?
15. Is writing things down hard work?
16. Is writing a good way to say something?

Technical Vocabulary

17. Is this a word? [say bicycle, er, friend, b]
18. How many words is this _____, one or two?
    [yellow; kangaroo; my friend; went swimming]
19. Does this card have one word on it, or more than one?
    [four cards]
20. Can you find three sentences in this story?
21. Can you show me a period, a question mark, an exclamation mark and quotation marks?
22. What things make up a story?